

## Introduction

To this point I have focused on two areas of the Health and Wealth Movement. First, the teaching that financial prosperity is within the reach of every Christian provided they put certain faith principles into action. Conversely, if you are not enjoying financial prosperity it is because you have failed to put these principles into practice.

The second area, which is by no means limited to the health and Wealth movement, is the elevation of leaders and pastors to celebrity status.

Tonight I want deal with the “*Health*” teaching of the health and wealth gospel – the claim to “perfect health.”

In contrast to the cult of prosperity where the significance of wealth in a believer’s life is understood in a way that is not supported by the Bible, and could therefore be called *unbiblical*, the “gospel” of perfect health is a *distortion* of something which in fact is biblical.

The New Testament affirms the notion of healing: It is part of Jesus’ and the apostles’ ministries; gifts of healing are part of the church’s Spirit-given gifts; and at least one text (**James 5:14-15**) specifically calls on believers to pray for the sick with the promise of answered prayer.

I want to make it clear from the outset that I am a believer in miraculous healing as an integral part of our Christian heritage. I believe that God graciously heals miraculously and that praying for healing is not only an option for the Christian community it is a command. I have both experienced healing personally, and seen people healed after I have prayed with them. However, together with many Christian scholars I disagree with the teaching of the Health and Wealth Gospel at a number of important points.

1. Their use of Scripture
2. Their selective use of texts
3. Their lack an adequate biblical theology

## The First Distortion

If it is true, that both Scripture and theology support our praying in faith for the gracious healing of the sick, what is the distortion inherent in the Health and Wealth gospel?

Basically, it lies in some biblical and theological distortions which insist:

- (1) that God wills perfect health and complete healing for every believer, and
- (2) that God has obligated Himself to heal every sickness for those who have faith (unless the sickness is the result of breaking God’s “health” or “faith” laws).

Integral to this theology is the insistence that faith can *claim* healing from God, and that any failure to be healed is not the fault of God but of the one who has not had enough faith. Very often *claiming* healing means to *confess* it as done, even though the symptoms persist, so that at times, blind, or diseased, people who claimed to have been healed, continue to grope in darkness and the sick still are riddled with pain.

If you read the literature from the Health and Wealth perspective they use a lot of Scripture to make their case for healing.

However, it must be said that their use of Scripture does not make up for three faults;

- (1) poor, or completely wrong, interpretations of key texts,
- (2) the selective use of texts, and
- (3) failure to have a holistic biblical view of things, especially a failure to understand the essential theological framework of the New Testament writers.

(*Gordon Fee The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*)

Teachers of this doctrine will tell you that they are “taking God at His Word”, or “Teaching what the Scripture plainly says”.

Presumably they mean the *original* meaning, that meaning which the author *plainly* intended and that the original readers should have *plainly* understood.

The first task of interpretation is *not* to find out what the text says to us, but to find out

what it originally said to the first hearers. Often our context clouds the meaning of Scripture so that this meaning is not so self-evident.

Exegesis, or understanding the context and original meaning of the passage, is the most basic failure of the "*perfect health*" evangelists time and again.

The arguments for full and complete health as God's only will for all believers are based on three sets of texts:

**a)** Paul's statement that "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law*" (**Galatians 3:14**) coupled with **Deuteronomy 28:21-22**, where disease is one of the curses of disobedience to the law.

It is argued from these texts that sickness is a part of the "curse of the law" from which Christ redeemed us.

**b)** **Isaiah 53** and the citation of **53:4** in **Matthew 8:17** and of **53:5** in **1 Peter 2:24**.

It is argued from these texts, and especially from the change to the past tense in 1 Peter, that healing is in the atonement in the same way as forgiveness,

**c)** A whole host of texts that remind us that God honours faith; e.g., Matthew 9:29; Mark 11:23-24; John 14:12; Hebrews 11:6; James 1:6-8.

Time does not allow me to do a thorough investigation of all these texts, but here are a few comments.

**a)** The first set of texts (**Galatians 3:14** coupled with **Deuteronomy 28:21-22**) we can deal with fairly quickly. This is a typical example of a totally faulty "concordance" interpretation, which finds similar English words in various texts and then tries to make them all refer to the same thing. There is not even the remotest possibility that Paul was referring to the "curses" of **Deuteronomy 28** when he spoke of the "curse of the law." "Redemption" in Galatians has to do with one thing only: how does one have right-relationship with God—through faith and trust in God's gracious acceptance and forgiveness of sinners), or by works of the law (acceptance by obedience to prescribed rules)?

The H&G interpretation of the text is totally foreign to the point Paul is making in this context in Galatians.

**b)** Another questionable claim is that the Bible teaches that healing is provided for in the atonement – Jesus' work on the cross – in the same way as the forgiveness of sin.

Many people in the Pentecostal churches believed this, but the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God made a clarifying statement. Healing is "provided for" because the "atonement brought release from the . . . consequences of sin"; nonetheless, since "we have not yet received the redemption of our bodies," suffering and death are still part of our experience until the day of resurrection.

Only by tortured reasoning is it possible to argue for bodily healing in the atonement.

While there are scores of texts that explicitly tell us that our sin has been overcome through Christ's death and resurrection, there is *not one* text that explicitly says the same about healing, not even **Isaiah 53** and its New Testament citations.

Matthew's (8:17) use of Isaiah 53:4 does not even refer to the cross; rather he clearly sees the text as being fulfilled in Jesus' *earthly ministry*. This is demonstrated both by the context and by Matthew's choice of Greek verbs in his own unique translation of the Hebrew (*elaben* λαμβάνω) = he took; *ebastasen* (βαστάζω) - he removed).

The quotation of **Isaiah 53:5** in **1 Peter 2:24**, on the other hand, does not refer to physical healing. The usage here is metaphorical, pure and simple. In a context in which slaves are urged to submit to their evil masters—even if it means their suffering for it—Peter appeals to the example of Christ, which Christian slaves are to follow. This appeal to Christ, beginning at verse 21, is filled with allusions to and citations of Isaiah 53, all of which refer to Christ's having suffered unjustly as the source of the slave's redemption from sin.

Peter says: "He himself bore our sins (Isaiah 53:12, cf. **53:4** in the Septuagint)... that we might die to sin." He then goes on: "By his wounds you have been healed (**53:5**), *for* you were as sheep going astray (**53:6**)." The allusions to both verses 5 and 6, joined by *for* and referring to "sheep going astray," plus the change to the past tense, all make it abundantly clear that "healing" here is a metaphor for being restored to health from the sickness of their sins.

But what did Isaiah himself intend? Almost certainly his first reference is metaphorical, as the Septuagint, the Targums, and Peter all recognize. Israel was diseased; she was grievously wounded for her sins (**Isaiah 1:5-7**).

- 5 Why should you be beaten anymore?  
Why do you persist in rebellion?  
Your whole head is injured,  
your whole heart afflicted.
- 6 From the sole of your foot to the top of your head  
there is no soundness—  
only wounds and welts  
and open sores,  
not cleansed or bandaged  
or soothed with oil.
- 7 Your country is desolate,  
your cities burned with fire;  
your fields are being stripped by foreigners  
right before you,  
laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.

Isaiah says, "The *punishment* that brought us peace was upon him, and by his *wounds* we are *healed*." In the context of Isaiah, that refers first of all to the healing of the wounds and disease of sin. Yet, since physical disease was clearly recognized to be a consequence of the Fall, such a metaphor could also carry with it the *literal* sense, and this is what Matthew picked up.

The Bible, therefore, does not explicitly teach that healing is provided for in the atonement. However, the New Testament does see the cross as the focus of God's redemptive activity. In this sense (and in the sense that sickness is ultimately a result of the Fall), one may perhaps argue that healing also finds its focal point in the atonement.

2. As with its "wealth" counterpart, the "gospel of perfect health" is also guilty of selectivity. Only those texts which fit the scheme are selected, and a whole series of hermeneutical contortions are devised to evade or explain away the texts that are an embarrassment to it.

Their "common sense approach" argues that every child of God *should* enjoy perfect health simply because he or she is a child of God; if they do *not* experience healing, then, of course, it is due to their lack of genuine trust in God. All of this simply refuses to take the Bible, the Fall, or God's grace to all people, seriously.

The Bible itself is much more realistic—and much more genuinely hopeful. God is revealed to have limitless power and resources; He regularly shows Himself strong on behalf of His people. Yet His people still live out their lives in a fallen world, where the whole creation, including the human body, is in "bondage to decay" (**Romans 8:21**), and will continue to be so until we receive "the redemption of our bodies" (**Romans 8:23**).

The Bible records many of Elisha's miracles, including healings; yet quite matter-of-factly, without judgment, it also records that he "was suffering from the illness from which he died" (**2 Kings 13:14**). In a similar manner, it records that James was martyred and Peter

delivered (**Acts 12:1-12**)—and Peter's deliverance was surely no direct result of his or the church's great faith!

Above all it is the Apostle Paul who presents problems for this point of view. On the one hand, his ministry was accompanied by "signs, wonders and miracles" at times (**2 Corinthians 12:12; Romans 15:19**); but his own health, and that of his companions, was anything but perfect health. And *never* is their sickness attributed to lack of faith, nor their recovery to great faith. Epaphroditus fell ill and nearly died, and in his case "God had mercy on him" (**Philippians 2:26**); yet Trophimus is left sick in Miletus (**2 Timothy 4:20**).

For the sake of his frequent stomach disorders, Paul does *not* tell Timothy to pray, exercise faith or claim his healing. Instead he urges him to drink a little wine for his sickness (**1 Timothy 5:23**).

3. The third area of weakness in the biblical interpretation of this movement is closely related to what has just been said. It is the failure to have, or to construct, an adequate biblical theology.

The essential framework of New Testament theology is eschatological; that is, it is focused on coming of the Messianic Age. By the time of the coming of Jesus, Jewish hopes for salvation had become totally eschatological. The present age was seen as under Satan's dominion, and thus totally evil. Evil men ruled, and they oppressed the righteous. They looked for God to vindicate them by bringing an end to the present age; He would do this through His Messiah, who would judge evil and usher in the New Age, the Kingdom of God.

Into this context Jesus came announcing the Kingdom as present in His own ministry. He demonstrated it by healing the sick, casting out demons, and freely accepting the outcasts. Then Jesus was crucified—and it seemed that all was lost. When He was raised from the dead His last discussion with His disciples is about the Kingdom. **Acts 1:6**. But instead, He returned to the Father and sent the promised Holy Spirit. Right here is where the problems begin, both for the early church and for us. Jesus announced the coming Kingdom as having arrived with His own coming. The Spirit's coming in fullness and power were also signs that the New Age had arrived. Yet the End of this age apparently had not yet taken place. Evil and its effects were still very much in evidence. How were they to reconcile this?

Very easily, beginning with Peter's sermon in **Acts 3**, the church came to realize that Jesus had not come to usher in the "final" End, but the "beginning" of the End, as it were. Thus they came to see that with Jesus' death and resurrection, and with the coming of the Spirit, the blessings and benefits of the Future had already come. In a sense, therefore, the End had already come. But in another sense it had not yet fully come. Thus they saw the Kingdom, and salvation, as both *already* and *not yet*.

The early believers, therefore, saw themselves as a truly eschatological people, who lived "between the times"—that is, between the time of the beginning of the End and the consummation of the End. Notice their eschatological statement at the Lord's Supper "show the Lord's death until he comes" (**1 Cor 11:26**) *Already* they knew God's free and full forgiveness, but they had *not yet* been perfected (**Philippians 3:7-14**). *Already* death was theirs (**1 Corinthians 3:22**), yet they would still die (**Philippians 3:20-22**).

*Already* they lived in the Spirit, yet they still lived in the world where Satan could attack. *Already* they had been justified and faced no condemnation, yet there was still to be a future judgment. They were God's "future people." They had been conditioned by the future; they knew its benefits, lived in light of its values. But they still had to live out these benefits and values in the present world.

**The problem in Corinth**, and that which the wealth and health gospel is repeating, was to emphasize the "already" in such a way that they almost denied the continuing presence of the world. They saw Christ only as exalted, but not as crucified. They believed that the only thing that glorified God was signs and wonders and power. Because God heals, He must heal everyone. There is no place for weakness or hunger or thirst for this kind of End time existence.

This distortion lay at the heart of the Corinthian rejection of Paul. His bodily weaknesses disqualified him in their view of apostleship. An apostle should be "spiritual," eloquent, living in glory and perfect health. They rejected Paul and his theology of the cross (with its ongoing suffering in the present age), because they saw themselves as "spiritual," redeemed from such weakness. In their view Paul looked like anything but an apostle of their "glorious" Jesus.

Paul tries everything in his power to get them back to his gospel. In **1 Corinthians 1:18-25**, he reminds them that the gospel has as its very base a "crucified Messiah." For the Corinthians that was a contradiction in terms. Messiah means power, glory, miracles; crucifixion means weakness, shame and suffering. They gladly accepted the false apostles, who preached a "different Gospel" with "another Jesus" (**2 Corinthians 11:4**), and condemned Paul for his bodily weakness (**2 Corinthians 10:10**).

In **1 Corinthians 4:8-13** he tried irony. "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings--and that without us!" he tells them. Then, with absolutely brilliant strokes, he annihilates them with the stark contrasts between himself and them, with himself as the example of what it means to live out the future in the present age.

In **2 Corinthians 3-6**, he tries to explain the true nature of apostleship, which has a glorious message but is proclaimed by a less-than-glorious messenger. "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us," he explains (**2 Corinthians 4:7**).

Finally, in **2 Corinthians 10-13**, he attacks their false teachers head-on. To do so he plays the role of the "fool" as in the ancient dramas. Paul uses boasting as a tactic. He boasts about all the things the Corinthians are against—Paul's weaknesses. He sets himself alongside the boasts of the false apostles, with their great visions and miracle-stories. However—in keeping with his point—his vision turns out to have no great word of revelation (12:4; he was not even allowed to tell its content!), and his miracle story had no miracle! All of this because he was a true disciple of the Crucified One. God's strength is perfected *not* in His delivering His Messiah from crucifixion, nor in delivering His apostle from physical suffering, but is seen *in* the crucifixion *itself*, and *in* the apostle's weaknesses.

Thus the "perfect health" evangelists simply repeat the Corinthian error. They find it impossible to live in the tension between the already and the not yet. Because God has already brought the Kingdom, they demand all of the future in the present age—except for the final resurrection – despite the evidence to the contrary.

But 1 and 2 Corinthians address this **over-realized eschatology**. Paul lived out a free, joyous existence in the already (in both want and plenty, in both sickness and health), because he knew that God had secured his life for the future— even though it was not yet fully realized. And in this present age, even some of God's choicest servants continue to be perfected through suffering, as was the Son of God Himself (**Hebrews 5:8-9**).